

Pace, I. (2016). Michael Finnissy at 70: The piano music (1). .



**CITY UNIVERSITY  
LONDON**

[City Research Online](http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/17511/)

**Original citation:** Pace, I. (2016). Michael Finnissy at 70: The piano music (1). .

**Permanent City Research Online URL:** <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/17511/>

### **Copyright & reuse**

City University London has developed City Research Online so that its users may access the research outputs of City University London's staff. Copyright © and Moral Rights for this paper are retained by the individual author(s) and/ or other copyright holders. All material in City Research Online is checked for eligibility for copyright before being made available in the live archive. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to from other web pages.

### **Versions of research**

The version in City Research Online may differ from the final published version. Users are advised to check the Permanent City Research Online URL above for the status of the paper.

### **Enquiries**

If you have any enquiries about any aspect of City Research Online, or if you wish to make contact with the author(s) of this paper, please email the team at [publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk).

**MICHAEL FINNISSY AT 70**  
**THE PIANO MUSIC (1)**  
**IAN PACE – Piano**  
**Recital at City University, London**

**Tuesday February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 7:00 pm**

**MICHAEL FINNISSY**

*Romeo and Juliet are Drowning* (1967)

*Snowdrift* (1972) (10')

*My love is like a red red rose* (1990)

*There never were such hard times before* (1991)

*French Piano* (1991)

*New Perspectives on Old Complexity* (1990, rev. 1992)

*First Political Agenda* (1989-2006)

1. Wrong place. Wrong time.
2. Is there any future for new music?
3. You know what kind of sense Mrs Thatcher made.

**INTERVAL**

**MICHAEL FINNISSY**

*English Country-Tunes* (1977, rev. 1982-85)

1. Green Meadows
2. Midsummer Morn
3. I'll give my love a garland
4. May and December
5. Lies and Marvels
6. The seeds of love
7. My bonny boy
8. Come beat the drums and sound the fifes

In 1996, the year of Michael Finnissy's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, I gave a series of six large concerts in London featuring his then-complete piano works. Twenty years later, Finnissy's output for piano is well over twice that size (the five-and-a-half hour *The History of Photography in Sound* (1995-2000) alone takes the equivalent of three recitals). This concert is the first of a series which will take place over the course of 2016, in a variety of locations, featuring Finnissy's principal piano works, to celebrate his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. This music remains as important to me (and as central a part of my own repertoire) as it did twenty years ago, though many ways in which I approach and interpret it – both as performer and scholar – have moved on considerably since then.

Tonight's programme features a diverse cross-section of pieces from across the breadth of the oeuvre, together with what is probably Finnissy's most renowned work, his cycle *English Country-Tunes*. The first half features a series of musical reflections on issues of Englishness, politics, transcription, the relationship between music and visual imagery, complexity, and folk music, all central concerns.

*Romeo and Juliet are Drowning* is the first work from Finnissy's adult output which can be called a 'transcription', in the sense of explicitly alluding to named pre-existing musical material. It is based upon the 'Scène d'amour' from Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, which would later occupy a pivotal role in *The History of Photography in Sound* - though there Finnissy predominantly references the music customarily taken to represent Juliette; here he focuses primarily on that for Roméo. Whilst this music is presented in a relatively recognisable form, albeit with chromatic elaboration, around half-way through he begins to 'submerge' this within a series of descending notes and chords derived from an inverted form of the drowning music from Berg's *Wozzeck*, until ultimately all trace of the Berlioz has disappeared.

*Snowdrift* takes its title from William Sharp's poem *The White Peacock*, which inspired Charles Griffes's piece of the same name (although *Snowdrift* does not allude to this piece).

...Here as the breath, as the soul of this beauty  
Moveth in silence, and dreamlike, and slowly,  
White as a snowdrift in mountain valley  
When softly upon it the fold light lingers...

The two intervals least acceptable to high serial composers were the major 3<sup>rd</sup> and minor 6<sup>th</sup> (equivalent in inversion). Finnissy determined in *Snowdrift* to write a work based around these two intervals, whilst working within a general idiom that bears some resemblance to that of the earlier compositional era. The piece opens with a didactic statement of the minor 6<sup>th</sup>, followed by murmurings in the bottom register and a string of grace notes at the very top. Both of these elements are developed with others, and gradually a melodic line emerges, thought, as in many of Finnissy's works, often interrupted or 'annotated', with a pitch content repeatedly focused around those two intervals.

The piece is much more than a mere impressionistic picture of a 'snowscape', though; Finnissy has suggested that the music bears a closer resemblance to the dynamic, dialectical medium of film than the static one of still visual images. *Snowdrift*, like the preceding piano piece *Autumnall* (1968-71) and a number of Finnissy's other

pieces, owes something of its structural working to the cinema, drawing in particular upon Eisenstein and others' use of montage. The pieces often switch between quite different materials, in such a way that meaning is generated as much by the juxtapositions as by the materials themselves. Sometimes a 'dissolve' occurs instead of a 'cut'; also material can be developed 'off-camera' so that it has moved on from the state in which it is left to that in which it is retaken up. The piano writing is generally hard-edged rather than soft-focussed (even in the quiet moments), as close to a Stockhausen *Klavierstück* as to a Debussy Prelude.

The following two short pieces capture and elaborate upon a basic mood or ambience. *My love is like a red red rose* takes its title from Robert Burns' 1794 poem of the same name:

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,  
That's newly sprung in June:  
O my Luve's like the melodie,  
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

The piece is a free fantasia around a continuous melody constructed from folk-like archetypes with accompaniment, first in a simple major modality in A-flat in the top part tempered by a Lydian fourth in the middle part, which ultimately serves to shift the music towards a somewhat more austere Aeolian modality on A.

*There never was such hard times before* was written for a tribute concert on the tenth anniversary of the death of Cornelius Cardew. Taking its melody from an English folk song of that name, which Finnissy sets first with a static drone-like accompaniment, then in two-part counterpoint, it alludes to the type of settings of folk songs (often of revolutionary origin) in the later period of Cardew's output.

*French Piano* takes its impetus from a drawing of Chris Newman, painter/poet/composer/singer and long-term collaborator of Finnissy. The drawing is simply of Newman's own piano, while resident in Paris, made in Newman's own estranged, abstracted and quasi-childish manner. Finnissy's work uses a myriad range of quotations to scan a wide territory of French music, including Rameau, Grety, Berlioz, Chausson and Debussy, a musical world he would return to in his later work *Unsere Afrikareise* (part of the *History of Photography*).

*New Perspectives on Old Complexity* was written for a 1993 issue of the American journal *Perspectives of New Music* dedicated to the issue of 'complexity', and drew upon a central section written for an earlier symposium on the same subject published in 1990 in conjunction with a conference in Rotterdam. In the three sections, Finnissy alludes clearly to three historically disjunct sources: the Sanctus from Mass on *Da gaudiorum premia* by John Dunstable (the exact date of which is unknown, but would be from the first half of the fifteenth century), set in counterpoint with a variant in the lower part; the 'Contrapunctus I', from J.S. Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (originally composed before 1742, then revised c. 1745 and 1748-49), in three- and four-part counterpoint, whilst maintaining a mostly white note modality also found in the first section; then a shorter and much more chromatic passage alluding more obliquely to Debussy's song 'Je tremble en voyant ton visage' (1910) from the cycle *Les Promenoir des deux amants*.

Finnissy's *First Political Agenda* is a set of three reflections on being a composer in England, whose titles are quite self-explanatory (the *Second Political Agenda* is a series of three longer pieces relating to the music of Satie, Schoenberg and Skryabin). The second piece alludes to the *Benedictus* from Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, whilst the icy third piece (a portrait of the 'ice queen'?) draws less obviously on a retrograded version of Parry's hymn *Jerusalem*.

Finnissy's *English Country-Tunes*, written in 1977 and originally indicated 'written in celebration of the Silver Jubilee of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II', is one of the most coruscating statements about 'Englishness' ever written. Quite different to the various musical expressions of 'pastoralism' that were written earlier in the century by such composers as Vaughan Williams, Finzi, Bliss or Moeran (though not lacking some allusions to that sort of musical world), Finnissy's musical and psychological trajectory is bleak, raw, unstable, excitable, violent and passionate (as Finnissy himself once said, 'passion can entail a certain amount of violence'). As a comment on the time in British history at which it was written (a time dominated by flag-waving patriotism, bunting, street parties, and the rest of the trappings of Jubilee Year, which would now seem quaint but then seemed ominous), Finnissy's work shares some underlying attitudes with the then relatively nascent punk movement, and films such as Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* and *The Last of England*.

Yet the work is still unmistakably that of an 'English' composer, not least through its portrayal of an idealised vision of a lost 'England', through modal melodies and lines that do not directly reference any actual English folk songs, but are constructed from archetypes derived from such music. This type of music forms one of the three fundamental categories of material to be found in the work, the others being a tempestuous writing (which Finnissy had developed in earlier piano works, and has some roots in the piano music of Stockhausen and Bussotti) in which the pianist practically traverses the whole keyboard simultaneously, and another type of material concentrated on one or both of the extreme registers (also highly characteristic of Finnissy's piano writing of the time). From the first movement, in which there is a continuous interplay between all of these types of material, the categories become progressively more polarised as the work proceeds, culminating in the terrifying *Totentanz* of the final movement. There are other more individuated moments, though, in particular an extended section in rapid groups of gnarled grace notes in the third movement, inspired by a performance of Boulez's *Structures II* by Katia and Marielle Labèque (who also premiered Finnissy's two piano work *Wild Flowers*).

The work was intended as a reflection on the hypocrisy of English culture, especially with respect to issues of sexuality, forever repressed but ever-present beneath the surface. The title is in part a pun on the first syllable of the second word, as in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2:

**Hamlet:** Lady, shall I lie in your lap?

**Ophelia:** No, my lord.

**Hamlet:** I mean, my head upon your lap?

**Ophelia:** Ay, my lord.

**Hamlet:** Do you think I meant *country* matters?

**IAN PACE** is a pianist of long-established reputation, specialising in the farthest reaches of musical modernism and transcendental virtuosity, as well as a writer and musicologist focusing on issues of performance, music and society and the avant-garde. He was born in Hartlepool, England in 1968, and studied at Chetham's School of Music, The Queen's College, Oxford and, as a Fulbright Scholar, at the Juilliard School in New York. His main teacher, and a major influence upon his work, was the Hungarian pianist György Sándor, a student of Bartók.

Based in London since 1993, he has pursued an active international career, performing in 24 countries and at most major European venues and festivals. His absolutely vast repertoire of all periods focuses particularly upon music of the 20th and 21st Century. He has given world premieres of over 200 piano works, including works by Julian Anderson, Richard Barrett, Konrad Boehmer, Luc Brewaeys, Aaron Cassidy, James Clarke, James Dillon, Pascal Dusapin, Richard Emsley, James Erber, Brian Ferneyhough, Michael Finnissy (whose complete piano works he performed in a landmark 6-concert series in 1996), Christopher Fox, Wieland Hoban, Volker Heyn, Evan Johnson, Maxim Kolomiets, André Laporte, Hilda Paredes, Alwynne Pritchard, Horatiu Radulescu, Lauren Redhead, Frederic Rzewski, Thoma Simaku, Howard Skempton, Gerhard Stäbler, Serge Verstockett, Hermann Vogt, Alistair Zaldúa and Walter Zimmermann. He has presented cycles of works including Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke I-X*, and the piano works of Ferneyhough, Fox, Kagel, Ligeti, Lachenmann, Messiaen, Radulescu, Rihm, Rzewski and Skempton. He has played with orchestras including the Orchestre de Paris under Christoph Eschenbach (with whom he premiered and recorded Dusapin's piano concerto *À Quia*), the SWF Orchestra in Stuttgart under Rupert Huber, and the Dortmund Philharmonic under Bernhard Kontarsky (with whom he gave a series of very well-received performances of Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand). He has recorded 34 CDs; his most recent recording of Michael Finnissy's five-and-a-half hour *The History of Photography in Sound* (of which he gave the world premiere in London in 2001) was released by Divine Art in October 2013 to rave reviews. Forthcoming recordings will include the piano works of Brian Ferneyhough (to be released in 2015), the Piano Sonatas of Pierre Boulez, and John Cage's *The Music of Changes*. The 2015-16 season will see appearances in Oslo, Kiev, Vilnius and around the UK.

He is Lecturer in Music and Head of Performance at City University, London, having previously held positions at the University of Southampton and Dartington College of Arts. His areas of academic expertise include 19<sup>th</sup> century performance practice (especially the work of Liszt and Brahms), issues of music and society (with particular reference to the work of Theodor Adorno, the Frankfurt School, and their followers), contemporary performance practice and issues, music and culture under fascism, and the post-1945 avant-garde, in particular in West Germany, upon which he is currently completing a large-scale research project. He co-edited and was a major contributor to the volume *Uncommon Ground: The Music of Michael Finnissy*, which was published by Ashgate in 1998, and authored the monograph *Michael*

Finnissy's *The History of Photography in Sound: A Study of Sources, Techniques and Interpretation*, published by Divine Art in 2013. He has also published many articles in *Music and Letters*, *Contemporary Music Review*, *TEMPO*, *The Musical Times*, *The Liszt Society Journal*, *International Piano*, *Musiktexte*, *Musik & Ästhetik*, *The Open Space Magazine*, as well as contributing chapters to *The Cambridge History of Musical Performance*, edited Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), *Collected Writings of the Orpheus Institute: Unfolding Time: Studies in Temporality in Twentieth-Century Music*, edited Darla Crispin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2009), *The Modernist Legacy*, edited Björn Heile (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), and *Beckett's Proust/Deleuze's Proust*, edited Mary Bryden and Margaret Topping (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009). Forthcoming articles will appear in *Search: Journal for New Music*, and the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*.